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FILE: ▪ Cinnamon (*Cinnamomum* spp.)

▪Spices, Medicinal
▪Ethnobotany
▪Pohnpei

HC 040252-291

Date: October 31, 2005

RE: The Importance of Cinnamon as Spice and Medicine

Lee R, Balick M. Sweet wood—cinnamon and its importance as a spice and medicine. *Explore.* January 2005:61–64.

The first recorded use of cinnamon (*Cinnamomum* spp.) was circa 2800 B.C.E. by Shen Nung, the father of Chinese medicine. Since then it has been used in many different cultures, and evidence of its value as a medicine, a culinary spice, in religious ceremonies, and as a food preservative is found throughout the world. The authors traveled to Pohnpei, a 702 km^2 island that is part of Oceania, a group of islands in the North Pacific, three-quarters of the way between Hawaii and Indonesia to study the local ethnobotany of cinnamon. They discuss the uses of cinnamon in Pohnpei as well as cinnamon's usage throughout recorded history.

Approximately 250 species of cinnamon have been defined; however, the species most utilized commercially today are *C. verum*, which is known as "the true cinnamon," and *C. cassia*, also called Chinese cassia or cassia bark tree. A local species of cinnamon, *C. carolinense*, known locally as *madeu*, grows on Pohnpei.

Madeu's bark has long been harvested and consumed as a beverage during meals, similar to the use of black or green tea (*Camellia sinensis*) in other cultures, and as a medicine. The bark is boiled, then strained, and the resulting decoction drunk to treat backaches, and when mixed with other local plants, to treat excessive menstruation. Previous harvesting methods, which entailed stripping the tree of its bark, killed the trees and their numbers decreased. Sustainable harvesting is now practiced, which allows the bark from the same tree to be harvested over and over again without killing the tree.

Many cultures over the centuries have also valued cinnamon. In Egypt, cinnamon, along with other ingredients, was used in the mummification process. Cinnamon was called *quinnamon* by the Phoenicians and Hebrews, and mention of it can be found in the Hebrew Bible book of

Exodus (chapter 30; verse 23). Europeans discovered cinnamon in the first century C.E., where it was so highly valued that 350 grams cost 15 times more than silver.

Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon) in the Indian Ocean is the major source of cinnamon today. In the United States, the Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act of 1938 defined "cinnamon" as *C. verum*, C. *cassia*, and other species of cassia. In contrast, cinnamon in Europe refers only to *C. verum*. The bark of *C. verum* is thinner than *C. cassia*, tends to curl in on itself, and has a weaker taste than *C. cassia*.

The article explains interesting details about how the bark is processed for the cosmetic and food industries today. It also summarizes some contemporary research. For example, *C. cassia* administered at 1, 3, and 6 g/day to type II diabetics (non-insulin dependent diabetics) for 40 days, significantly reduced their fasting sugar, triglycerides, and cholesterol compared to placebo.[1] In vitro studies have shown it to be a potent antibiotic and antifungal. One clinical trial showed cinnamon was effective at decreasing oral *Candida albicans* (thrush) in a group of HIV-positive volunteers.

—John Neustadt, ND

Reference

[1]Khan A, Safdar M, Khan MMA, Khattak K, Anderson R. Cinnamon improves glucose and lipids of people with type 2 diabetes. *Diabetes Care*. 2003;26:3215-3218. (see HC 020343-257)

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